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ABSTRACT

Theories of creative writing have been for the most part bound up with theories of art. Both teachers and the general public, however, are dissatisfied with such institutionalized theories. Creative writers should first look to theories of writing rather than infer them from art. Recent composition theories, both cognitive theories and those of collaborative learning, can not only inform creative writing pedagogies, but can also consistently address the theoretical concerns of creative writers. A collaborative approach to creative writing instruction can provide a reasonable theory of the imagination, address concerns about authority, and at the same time teach conventions of public forms of imaginative prose and verse. Imagination transforms experience into language, and is therefore necessarily related to the process of becoming an individual and becoming individually skilled at writing in relation to others and the world. New formulations of collaborative learning would modify the idea of joint apprenticeships in the classroom to mutual apprenticeship or peer tutoring. Collaborative learning in the creative writing classroom will help wean students from institutional dependency and teach them ways of negotiating self and art in the larger world, in ways that transform their experiences in that world into fictions they themselves can believe. (Fifteen references are attached.) (SG)

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Creative Writing and Collaborative Learning

Now, in my case, I'm writing this just for myself. . . . I'll never have any readers (182).

-The Underground Man, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Notes from Underground

Through reading and writing we take part in a conversation going on in human beings throughout the world (2).

-Kenneth Bruffee, A Short Course in Writing

Without Contraries is No Progression (line 28).

-William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell

It seems to me that theories of creative writing have been for the most part bound up with theories of art. Sir Philip Sidney's assertion in his Defense of Poesy that literature delight and teach certainly suggests a classical view of art and rhetoric: art and rhetoric seem to coexist in the making and interpretation of "creative writing"--a contemporary term not only puzzling to many artists now, but whose definition may have puzzled Sidney himself. Nevertheless, mimetic theories of art, challenged and transformed by Romantics such as Wordsworth, all suggest theories of creative writing. Wimsatt's Verbal Icon, a seminal work for New Critics, suggests that the separation from emotive and referential meaning is not useful, that the structure of meaning is iconic, suggesting yet another theory for

contemporary creative writers to consider: that they proffer works for appreciation and critique among highly specialized interpretive communities who can make aesthetic sense of their words. Since the 1950's, when the Iowa Writers' Workshops were defining these highly specialized interpretive communities, a dominant practice of teaching creative writing emerged: writers work in small groups, primarily in joint apprenticeship to a master craftsperson--the workshop leader--and to a much lesser degree in mutual apprenticeship with one another.

One result of these institutionalized theories of creative writing is a general sense of disappointment by the general literate public in, for example, the quality of contemporary American fiction being produced in workshops. According to Michael Skube, in his 1989 Pulitzer Prize essay, "'Creative Writing' and the English Department'":

> [T]he fiction that has been coming out of these nurseries is hot stuff, albeit passionless, in the English departments. . . . The proliferation of creative writing schools has fostered the notion that writing fiction is a private reverie, with the result that any sensible reader soon gets bored and moves on to someone who has a real story to tell. (369)

Within the creative writing community, teachers are also dissatisfied with their methods and the theory of apprenticeship that underlies them. According to fiction writer and poet Eve Shelnutt,

> Students are rarely . . . able to avoid seeing the teacher as an authority figure. . . . Not only do students talk of developing a "tin ear" from so many workshops, they also

> speak of themselves developing a tendency to write stories specifically "for workshop." (151)

Still other teachers of creative writing, such as Joseph Moxley, have turned to theoreticians of composition for direction. He writes:

> As a whole, composition research and the anecdotal accounts of professional writers challenge us to reconsider theories of creativity and practices. Ultimately, our increased understanding of what writing involves suggest that creativity is the natural consequence of learning, involvement and commitment. For this reason . . . we need to re-evaluate the assumption that only a chosen few are capable of creative writing or creative thinking. (28)

Moxley's concern has long been shared by rhetoricians such as Ann Berthoff: "We need a theory of imagination," writes Berthoff, "and we will find it implicit in the principles of rhetoric which inform our teaching of language and literature, reading and writing" (647).

Theory and practice in the teaching of creative writing is understandably accompanied with a great deal of malaise, and this suggests a quandary for earnest teachers of creative writing such as Moxley and Shelnutt. Should creative writers first look to theories of writing rather than infer them from art? I would like to propose that recent theories of composition--both cognitive theories and those of collaborative learning--can not only inform creative writing pedagogies, but consistently address the theoretical concerns of creative writers. Two major concerns are:

1) Can a collaborative approach to the teaching of creative writing provide a reasonable theory of the imagination--one that

adequately describes the private act of invention?

2) Can a collaborative approach address concerns about authority and at the same time the need to teach conventions of public forms of imaginative prose and verse?

I will first address collaboration and the imagination, and I would like to begin with a critical notion articulated by Berthoff: "Rhetoric reminds us that the function of language is not only to name, but also to formulate and to transform--to give form to feeling, cogency to argument, shape to memory" (647). My assumption is that all writing, whether the kind now institutionalized by universities as "creative writing," or otherwise, involves the transformation of memory, of feeling, through a negotiation of the writer's "felt sense" of the world and symbols that represent it. Furthermore, this is a cognitive aspect of writing, and is necessarily bounded by the writing situation. James Moffett describes this "felt sense" as "inner speech": "However personal or impersonal the subject matter, all writing as authoring must be some revision of inner speech for a purpose and an audience" (233).

One need only recall the critical importance of memory, and manifestations of "inner speech" in works such as Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," Gilman's "Yellow Wallpaper," or Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway. Yet there still remains a mythology of the imagination that continues to influence creative writers, for example, Wordsworth's insistence in "The Preface to the Second Edition of Lyrical Ballads," that language is spontaneous, or Henry James's that fictions arise from the "pressure of the individual will" (46). But these rather mystical notions of writing exist alongside others that point to

cognitive dimensions: for example, Moffett's reconsideration of William James's notion of "stream of consciousness," from which he distills "'inner speech' . . . a version of that stream . . . which can directly serve as the wellspring of writing" (231). It is this wellspring that practicing writers such as Flannery O'Connor have sought to further describe in a larger context. According to O'Connor, "There are two qualities that make fiction. One is the sense of mystery and the other is the sense of manners. You get the manners from the texture of existence that surrounds you" (qtd. in Miller 346). Catherine D. Miller, another fiction writer, in her essay, "The Use of Contemporary Culture in American Fiction," suggests that O'Connor's version of manners--the texture of existence that surrounds us--is culturally and socially formulated. Moffett, then, might very well suggest that the "mystery" of which O'Connor speaks is "Egocentricity . . . a localization within larger circles of ethnocentricity, biocentricity, and geocentricity," and that the transformation of memory and feeling into words "takes the interplay of inner voices put back into the social world," therefore requiring "enormously more small group interaction" (234).

If we believe that creative writers are concerned somehow with the transformation of both inner speech and the world around them, it does not take a large leap of faith to draw on the ideas of Kenneth Bruffee, who suggests, as many creative writing teachers are beginning to now see, that the imagination transforms experience into language, and is therefore necessarily related to an entire social process of becoming individual, and becoming individually skilled at writing in relation to others and to the world. Bruffee writes,

> We first experience and learn 'the skill and partnership of conversation' in the external arena of direct social exchange with other people. Only then do we learn to displace that 'skill and partnership' by playing silently ourselves, in imagination, the parts of all the participants in the conversation. (639)

Collaborative learning also adequately addresses the concerns of teachers of creative writing about authority. While early formulations of collaborative learning were focused on what Bruffee calls "socially destructive authoritarian forms" (636) in England during the Vietnam era, and later in group decision making, for example, in the diagnosis of illness, more recent formulations and practices involve changing the social structure of the classroom. These new formulations, applied to creative writing pedagogies, would modify the idea of joint apprenticeship in the classroom to mutual apprenticeship--peer tutoring. When writers learn collaboratively, particular skills and conventions are not taught via error analysis by a master craftsperson, but collectively through, as Bruffee suggests, "forms of indirect teaching in which the teacher sets the problem and organizes students to work it out collaboratively" (637). This, I feel, especially addresses the concerns of students of creative writing for whom the workshop experience can be a frightening mix of signals. First, most student poets and fiction writers enter workshops with a mixture of romantic notions about invention and revision, only to be faced with the multiple tensions of setting--a small group offering many readings of their work and often straining for consensus to please the master craftsperson, and the master craftsperson, who is

often an unknown and puzzling variable. In fact, when I have asked my creative writing students to process write about the workings of our workshops, they spend much of their time writing about my management of the group (in spite of my efforts to be democratic) rather than the group as a whole or their role in it.

I once asked student writers to describe writing situations in which they felt displaced from our class, or from other groups. One student wrote, "My feeling of displacement is greatest when I cannot believe what I have written." This student must have sensed what Charles Bernstein believes: that creative writing is essentially related to language acquisition and acculturation. Bernstein says, "I don't teach Literature. I teach poetry-as-a-second-language, or PSL--People in Solidarity with Language."

Collaborative learning offers a reasonable theory of imagination and pedagogies that can deal effectively with the concerns of teachers about authority. Moreover, I feel collaborative learning is a vital approach to writing and culture. Experienced practicing poets and fiction writers learn to live in the wings, and not the center stages of institutions. This is not news. But for this reason I think creative writing students feel a greater need to "belong" to a writing community than to be a part of the conversation in that community. Collaborative learning in the creative writing classroom, especially in BFA and MFA programs, will help wean creative writers from institutional dependency--the "nurseries" Michael Skube mentions--and teach them ways of negotiating self and art in the larger world, and in ways that transform their experiences in that world into fictions they themselves can believe.

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